1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER TEN

THE RHYTHM OF LEPCHA LIFE

i

000 Those travellers who mention the Lepchas in their accounts of their journeys in Sikkim and Tibet refer to them with startling unanimity as 'fairies' or 'elves' or 'woodland folk', according to the fantasy and self-consciousness of the different writers. The Europeans in British India who have had more prolonged contact with them stress as their chief qualities their mildness and truthfulness.

If one accepts Dr. Margaret Murray's account of the Fairies[1] as the original inhabitants of England who after the invasions of various conquering races lived in very hidden places and who were extremely timid in their contacts with the conquerors, the comparison of the Lepchas with the Fairies is extremely apt. The Lepchas who still retain a more or less integrated culture do live in relatively hidden and inaccessible places; they are remarkable climbers and walkers, they know the forest and its produce far better than any of their neighbours, and it is quite possible that they may appear
609 in places where there is no visible path. They are pathologically shy of strangers; a foreigner passing through their villages, were he to notice the scattered and inconspicuous houses, might well think them deserted. The first few days in Lingthem we scarcely saw a soul; walking about the village we saw only shut and smokeless houses, with a very occasional dodderer or infant. The majority of the inhabitants had simply taken to the forest.

● 123 After a time this timidity wore off. I insisted that all goods bought locally should be paid for without bargaining, so that they should not fear requisitions; if too high a price was asked the goods were to be refused. I stated that I had got medicines and could cure certain sores and diseases, and after a couple of bold people

[1] *The God of the Witches*, by Dr. Margaret A. Murray. London Sampson Low n.d.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

123 had been successfully treated a great number of people came for medicines and stayed to talk. People who came for their own reasons were given betel nut, cigarettes and sweet tea; those who came at my request and who stayed a long time were paid at the same rate as they would have been for a day's coolie work (eight annas); when I found their information particularly interesting I gave something extra as well. As far as possible I avoided the system of direct question and answer; nearly always some topic would arise naturally and I would let the speaker develop it as he wished; at other times I would suggest a topic. Only when a certain rapport was established did I start cross-questioning. The greater part of the conversations took place in the monastery enclosure, where there were a number of convenient outcrops of rock for sitting on; but some of the most valuable information was obtained casually on walks or through over-hearing conversations.

Once they got used to the shock of my arrival my presence did not, as far as I am able to judge, affect their actions or behaviour in any way, except possibly for an occasional affectation of modesty on the part of the women. At first nursing mothers used to cover their breasts in my presence, but after a few weeks they no longer bothered to do so. In so far as Lepchas divide humanity into 'inside our group' and 'outside our group' they placed me after trial in the former category. This is not to claim that they accepted me 'as one of themselves'; they certainly never did so; but they did not regard me as a dangerous stranger. I think they regarded me in three lights: as a dispenser of good medicine and other useful or pleasant articles; as an eccentric who asked questions to which everybody knew the answer, who paid for conversation, who made silly jokes in bad Lepcha, and—most peculiar of all—talked to and played with children; and finally, owing to the colour of my skin and the messages sent from Gangtok, as an honoured guest and, in a way, as a representative of the Maharajah. In this last aspect I was a slight nuisance; if we visited a house a special seat in the *dé-ong* was always prepared and *chi* served in the best container; a certain amount of deference and formality always marked the beginning of such visits. But although they were deferential they were never servile; nothing was done, as far as I could tell, with the intention of ingratiating themselves with me. If I wanted to speak to a person and that person was busy a message would be sent to that effect; if I wanted to be present at anything at which it was the custom that strangers should not be present

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

(that is at a birth, certain moments in the marriage feast or at death) or in a house at which I was not welcome I would be told politely but firmly that I was not wanted.

My relationship with the Lepchas was, I thought, more intellectual than emotional; they quite liked and respected me, but did not feel about me at all. Consequently I was very surprised and moved when on my departure three of the people whom I had got to know best actually said goodbye to me with tears in their eyes and appeared genuinely sorry that I was leaving; this surprised me the more as Lepchas are not at all in the habit of dramatising emotions or situations; the only time I saw any of them cry was when two sisters broke into tears when a prayer-flag was set up in memory of a third sister who had recently died.

I do not think that my colour or appearance was the chief bar to emotional contact with the Lepchas; my habits were a more formidable obstacle, for I ate somewhat different foods, lived in a different way, and, above all was absurdly fussy about cleanliness, a completely meaningless concept to the Lepchas. But most important of all was the fact that I was alone, without wife or family or kin (it was generally believed that C. J. Morris was my father but for some obscure reason—probably because I was a bastard—we refused to acknowledge the relationship) and had no shared experiences with them; also, although present-giving on both sides was fairly constant, I naturally could not build up in the time a system of mutual benefits and obligations on which their own emotional relationships rest.

Present-giving forms a continual motive in Lepcha life. If you go as a guest to a feast you take a present with you, and you are given a present—usually some uncooked meat—to take away with you; if you go on a visit you take a present, and you are given a present on leave-taking. Casual visitors to another's house are always offered food and drink. Except for the formal gifts of *aséḱ* and marriage these presents are really presents and not exchanges, except symbolically; it is a point of honour and gives a feeling of self-satisfaction to be able to give as good a gift as possible; and consequently when there is disproportion between the means of two people there is an equal disproportion between the gifts they give and receive.

I often found these gifts a subject of embarrassment, for the Lepchas would constantly try to overdo me in generosity, giving more than they could afford or I could want; particularly as

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

practically the only present I could give was money, which is not of very great use to them. I had frequent tussles with them on the subject of payment for medical services; I insisted that medicine should not be paid for; they considered that it was shameful to take something for nothing and I frequently had to bully people with bad sores, which I knew I could cure easily, to come up for treatment; they were unwilling to do so because they thought they had nothing suitable to give as presents, and they were ashamed to take something for nothing. An interesting sidelight on their attitude towards gift-giving and strangers is shown by the behaviour of two of the bigger households who on my first arrival refused to sell to the servants either eggs or milk; and later when they got to know us used to come with presents of these commodities for which they refused to accept any return payment except after long argument.

When the Lepchas got to know me well they were not at all shy of asking for things; but except for cigarettes, betel nut and iodine or dressings for small cuts they always offered something in return for whatever they asked for and were in no way offended if their requests were refused. They were particularly attracted by illustrated papers and asked frequently to be given them; to a certain extent they recognised very clearly the objects portrayed in drawings and photographs, though their explanations to one another of the situations depicted were, as might well be imagined, very peculiar. I got far more amusement out of hearing three Lepchas explaining to one another what the pictures in *Punch* were about than I ever got out of reading that paper. One or two people asked for pictures of special subjects; Rigya kept on asking for pictures of war because 'he was amazed at them and had never seen or thought of anything like it'; Chudo liked pictures of cars and fashionable life, for he had spent nearly a year in Gangtok as scullion in the Maharajah's kitchens and knew about the lives of Europeans and was able to explain them to his less fortunate compatriots. For him European life consisted chiefly in extremely formal and uncomfortable meals at which there was never enough to eat, interspersed with quarrels of an extremely dramatic nature. In one of the numbers of the *Illustrated London News* there were several reproductions of Chinese Buddhist frescoes and there was quite a competition to possess these among the older and more pious lamas. After I had had some photos enlarged and had shown people their photos I was bombarded with requests for photos of individuals

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 . AK5 Lepcha AK5

nd groups; people used to come up dressed in their best clothes nd stand very firmly at attention as if they were expecting to be hot any minute. A never failing source of amusement was looking hrough the view-finder of the camera, or, better still, field glasses; eople would return again and again with their friends with demands o look through these wonderful appliances.

I had brought with me several packets of Japanese water flowers o amuse the children, and also in the hope of getting a lead as to whether they would interpret the sudden changes in these flowers n an animist fashion or not. The children quite liked looking t them but were not nearly as interested as their elders, who pointed ut the changes taking place in the flowers in hushed and enthralled voices to the children and to each other. The children stared at hem and said they were very pretty; when I asked 'who made hem grow' they said 'the water makes the flowers grow', or lse just 'the flowers bloom'. One child even corrected me when said 'who makes the flowers grow', telling me I should say what makes the flowers grow'; and when I put leading questions sking whether gods or devils made the flowers grow they always replied in an emphatic negative. The children know about devils and are frightened of them and some of them have heard them; but the devils' and gods' spheres of action are rigorously defined and nothing which falls outside those spheres should be ascribed to them. What the children liked best about the flowers were the brightly coloured envelopes and the white paper they were contained in. They would treasure these most carefully and in the case of the paper would fold it up extremely neatly and tidily into small squares.

Lepcha children and Lepcha adults are extraordinarily unselfish; after a little experience I never bothered to divide collective gifts among them; I would give a packet of cigarettes or a handful of barley sugar to the person nearest to me, certain that it would be divided completely fairly among all present. Even with the Japanese flowers I would open a packet, show one child how to put the flowers in water and would then leave the open packet by the glass; one of the children would be sure to divide up the dry flowers equally among all present and if another child arrived later those who still had some flowers or paper would at once give a share to the new arrival. Except in the case of youngest or only children I never heard or saw children quarrel about the ownership of anything or the sharing of it. With little tots of three or four

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

the gift-giving habit was already established; very often after I had given them some Japanese flowers a small child would come tottering up to me with either a live flower or a few bright coloured seeds tightly clutched in its hand. Almost the only positive lesson in good manners the children are taught is that when elders give them a present they must receive it with joined hands; and one day Pembu's four-year-old son scolded me severely because I took his gift of a cactus blossom in one hand only.

ii

My type-picture of the Lepchas is of a crowd gathered for some feast or ceremony. In point of fact this only represents a very small portion of their lives; but on work-days they are so widely scattered as to be invisible and almost unfindable in the open country; often for days at a time they are absent from home, working in distant fields, and sleeping in the field-house; when they do return home in the evening they are usually tired and go to sleep fairly shortly after the evening meal.

The Lepcha working-day starts at cock-crow when everybody gets up; a substantial cold meal, usually consisting of grain, with perhaps some milk and any meat or flavourings which may be available is eaten; it is usually accompanied by tea. Then everybody goes to their work in the fields or forests, taking with them some popped corn or cold cooked rice in their haversack to nibble if they feel hungry during the day's work. In the evening towards sundown they come home for the second meal of the day. The youngest daughter-in-law is meant to do the cooking, under the direction of the house-mother, or, if she be too old, of the eldest daughter-in-law, who gives out the supplies; but in practice all the women present lend a hand. If there are no women free, men will do the cooking; but it is considered slightly degrading for a house-father to have to prepare his own meal. Each evening enough is cooked to serve for that evening and also for the following morning.

While the food is being prepared the men may weave mats or baskets, or do other odd jobs about the house, or they may sit and drink *chi*. Everybody eats the main meal together; the house-mother hands out the food, serving the oldest members first; if there are young children the fathers will feed the daughters and the mothers the sons. After the evening meal there may be a visit either

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

114 the top of Kinchinjunga to the far banks of the Teesta, which
636 we could see churning away a thousand feet below us. To which village did we wish to go? Our informant rattled off the names of the numerous alternatives with machine-gun rapidity, but so far as I was concerned one place was as good as another. I said that I wanted a large village and one where the houses were all close together, since this would facilitate work and enable us to camp in the middle. In answer to this it appeared that there were two possible
346 alternatives: Lingtem and Lungden. The former was said to possess a fine new monastery, whereas Lungden had none; also it was slightly larger and a bit more inaccessible. I plumped for Lingtem, monasteries being very much in my line, and thither we decided to go the following morning.

Very early the next morning Palden came to my bedside. During the night he had been talking to the villagers (they are constantly in and out of Mangen), and they were not so certain that they wanted us now that they realised we wished to stay in Lingtem for at least some months. They were suspicious of our motives, so he said, and were afraid that we had come to enlist them for some sort of service elsewhere. He also said that he was unable to allay their suspicions, since he himself, to be quite frank, was a bit uncertain about it all.

177 The Jongu people had of course seen plenty of Europeans.
484 Most of them went from time to time to Gangtok, and many had been as far afield as Kalimpong and Darjeeling: also on several occasions the members of the various Kinchinjunga expeditions had passed through their valley; but this was a very different matter from settling down to stay for months in one village.

123 Amongst the Lingtem men was one Tempa who, I discovered, spoke Nepali fluently: also he was a man of some position in the village. I sent for him. I told him why we had come: that we Europeans had made a sorry mess of the business of living: that we had forgotten to a great extent what it meant to be happy. I told him also that at one time the people of Europe, too, had lived lives as free and

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

133 untrammelled as I had been led to believe the Lepchas still did; and that if this were really true, I wanted to see where we, in our ignorance and haste, had made mistakes. Also, there might be some things in which we could help the Lepchas. We were neither of us doctors; but we had plenty of simple medicines and would do what we could. All we wanted was to live quietly in the village: to talk to people, and see how they ordered their lives. We would give no trouble; nor did we shoot or fish. Somehow I convinced him and he agreed that we might go. He would collect coolies to carry our baggage and we could start as soon as they had finished their meal. "Could we be ready by ten o'clock?" We could.

133 We dropped quickly down to the Teesta, crossed the iron [491 suspension bridge, which was plentifully decorated with 768] votive Buddhist flags, and had struggled to the top of the pass, called Sungphyok Hlo, which is the real entrance to the Talung, by midday. This low pass is formed by a ridge that runs at right angles to the main Talung Valley and is duplicated on the other side of the river which here runs through a small gorge. I was told that it was formed in this way.

773 Konchen is the lord of all the devils. His elder daughter 823 is Chomo Hla Ri (Chomolari is on the edge of the Tibetan plateau and was climbed last year, for the first time, by Mr. F. Spencer Chapman), and his younger daughter is called Gongtuk Hlo, which is a ridge running down to the Teesta between Mangen and Singhik. Now the hill behind Lingtem is called Lungi Pano, or King Lungi, and he had a daughter named Sundem Pandi who was married to Sungphyok Hlo. The ridge opposite to Sungphyok Hlo is called Kahypo Hlo, and at one time these two were constantly quarrelling over the possession of King Lungi's daughter. Since they were unable to agree Konchen decided to put a stop to their quarrels, and so it was that he sent his daughter Gongtuk Hlo to part them. Gongtuk Hlo has remained there ever since; and thus the two have never been able to meet again.

: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

ghty people, including men, women and children, would 527
present. They would spend the day feasting and drinking, 796
d on some occasions would continue the party well into
e following day. There would generally be some visitors [574]
om nearby villages and, in consequence, much exchange
gossip. These fortnightly meetings served the purpose of
newspaper and helped to keep the people in touch. They [203]
ere almost the only break in a life of otherwise unceasing
il.

There are no shops in Lingtem, no doctor, and no school. 438
he people are mainly self-supporting and grow all their
vn food. Such things as cotton, oil and salt are obtained
om Mangen which, in addition to a few Marwari shop- [205]
epers, has also a post office to which mails are delivered
ice a week. This, however, is not much used, since the [212]
epchas are for the most part still illiterate. This means that
order not to forget a thing they do not find it necessary
commit it to writing. As a result, they have, like most [153]
imitive peoples, quite remarkable memories.

For the first few days we were left completely alone; not 609
soul ventured near us. Early each morning Dhawa and
would set off in our quest for people, but everywhere we
ent there was nothing but empty houses, each with its [231]
ardian dog. I began to get worried, for it certainly looked
though the Maharaja was right, although actually (but
only learned this later) the people were merely away
orking in their fields. And then one morning Geoffrey
scovered an ancient alone in a house. He was toothless, 123
crepit, and ill, but willing to risk a visit. We decoyed him
to the monastery, gave him some medicine and plied
n with cigarettes. As an informant he was useless; but
visit served to break the ice. Others followed, and the
lage soon realised that we really were harmless. There-
er we were able to arrange for a regular stream of
formants and someone or other usually came each morning
talk. In this manner we soon came to know most of the
lage by sight, and after the first few weeks were able to

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

123 spend most of our time with such of the people as were really willing to talk. One or two were genuinely interested in their history and customs and with them we spent most of our days.

I had been taught at Cambridge to avoid asking questions: the ideal method was so to observe and absorb a culture that mere questioning became almost superfluous. It was essential to live in close contact with the people. In our particular case, however, this was not possible. Even had we chosen to live with a Lepcha family we should have been in no better position to observe what was happening at the other end of the village: its very grouping militated against working in ideal conditions, however long we stayed. When we got to know the people better we did of course visit them in their houses, and were always present when a ceremony was being performed. There is much to be said for "going native" and I have always envied those whose digestions can stand it. The alternative method, however, does permit one to see things from a completely detached standpoint, whereas the "native" soon learns to take many things for granted. After all, how many of us could explain our own culture to a Lepcha, for instance, in such a way that nothing was taken for granted?

We would usually start a conversation on some selected topic; but once an informant was well away we let him have his head. Thus, we might start with war and finish with abortion: all was grist for the ethnological mill. The following account is built up from such oddments of information; an uncompleted jigsaw with doubtless many pieces wrongly placed. Its main pattern, I hope, is clear, but I make no claim to be infallible. In any case I must again remind the reader that this is a purely personal account, tinged with my likes and dislikes. I have tried as far as possible to be objective; but like Mr. Dick I, too, have my King Charles's head.